



Briefing Following the Private Board Meeting Held on 30 April 2020

The Board of Directors met in private session on 30 April 2020. Board meetings are currently being held in private only due to COVID-19 and to comply with government requirements during the lockdown and period of social distancing.

This helps the Trust to protect its staff and those who may have otherwise observed our meetings, including our Governors. The Board of Directors believe it is vitally important to ensure appropriate public transparency during the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore the following briefing has been produced to provide an overview of those discussions which would ordinarily have been held in public.

A number of supporting papers have also been published on the Trust's website at the following link:
<https://www.neas.nhs.uk/about-us/board-papers/board-papers-2020/april-2020.aspx>

Chairman's Update

The Chairman updated the Board that a teleconference had been held with Governors earlier in the week replacing the planned Council of Governors' meeting. The Governors had received a briefing on the Trust's response to COVID-19 and the Chief Executive and Director of People and Development had answered pre-submitted questions from Governors. Positive feedback had been received from a number of Governors following the session.

The Chairman provided assurance that he had been linking in to a number of different forums during the month to keep up-to-date on emerging issues and represent the Trust. This included the National Chairs' Advisory Group as well as the Association of Ambulance Chief Executives' (AACE) Chairs' teleconference.

On behalf of the Board the Chairman thanked the Executive team and Trust staff for their significant commitment and contribution during challenging times.

Chief Executive's Update

The Chief Executive formally announced that Joanne Baxter, Director of Quality and Safety, had successfully secured a new position as Chief Operating Officer at Gateshead Health NHS Foundation Trust. On behalf of the Board the Chief Executive and Chairman congratulated Joanne Baxter on her success and thanked her for her significant contribution to the Trust. Joanne would be leaving the Trust in mid-June 2020 and a recruitment process would be commencing shortly.

The Chief Executive also assured the Board that the team was regularly communicating with staff and had held a live question and answer session using video technology in the previous week. Just over one hundred staff tuned in for the live session with a further two hundred and fifty staff watching the recording of the briefing to-date. Further briefings would be held with staff over the coming weeks.

COVID-19 Update

The Chief Executive provided an update on the Trust's response to COVID-19 supported by members of the Executive Team.

The Chief Executive informed the Board that the Trust was aiming to maintain some core business as usual tasks. This included early planning for winter, which was likely to be challenging due to the added impact of COVID-19 as well as normal winter pressures.

Assurance was also provided that the Trust was planning for the reinstatement of more Scheduled Care services following the latest communication from Sir Simon Stevens regarding the step up of some critical acute services. This included reviewing social distancing implications for Scheduled Care to keep patients and staff as safe as possible.

The Trust was working hard to ensure that robust risk management and decision-making processes and documentation were in place to support the COVID response. It was agreed that the Audit Committee would be looking into commissioning a review of decision-making records to provide some independent verification and identify any learnings.

The Chief Operating Officer provided the Board with an overview of the mechanisms in place to manage the COVID response. This included conference calls 7 days per week. The statistics for March 2020 showed that performance had been challenging, particularly around 111 call demand. There had been improvements in call answer for both 111 and 999 in April 2020 and acuity levels were reducing, along with 999 demand.

The Chief Operating Officer informed the Board that the integrated nature of the Trust's services had been hugely beneficial in supporting the front-line response to COVID-19. The integration of the 999 and 111 call-handling system and the fact that many call-handlers were dual trained enabled the Trust to cope more effectively with the extreme 111 call demand. It had allowed the service to respond dynamically and quickly to changing levels of demand.

The Board discussed the reduction in 999 activity and the national concern that patients were more reluctant to use NHS services in the current time. The importance of patients who need emergency help continuing to contact the 999 service on a timely basis was stressed.

Assurances were provided by the Director of Quality and Safety that the Trust had a good level of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) stock. There was also sufficient testing capacity for staff available at the Trust's own testing hubs and at acute trusts across the region.

The Medical Director informed the Board that a clinical advice desk had been set up and staffed by his team to provide additional clinical support to paramedics where required. This was working well and would continue to be developed.

The Trust was continuing to adhere to the guidance issued by Public Health England (PHE) in relation to PPE requirements for cardiac arrest responses. It was recognised nationally that there remained a lack of full alignment between the PHE guidance and the advice of the Resuscitation Council UK. As new guidance was released, colleagues would continue to review the information and ensure that the staff adhered to the required standards.

The Director of People and Development briefed the Board that the Trust continued to increase the number of staff and volunteers available to support front line operations. The Trust was also continuing to promote staff welfare, health and wellbeing services. The Trust was risk assessing pregnant workers and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) staff.

The Group Director of Finance and Contracting provided an overview of the financial operating environment. It was noted that the Trust had been notified of block contract and top-up values in place of the normal commissioning and contracting round, which had been suspended due to COVID-19. The Trust was continuing to maintain good records of expenditure relating to COVID to support the monthly national returns.

The Trust was establishing a 'review and rebuild' cell to capture good learnings and support the Trust to maintain and embed some of the positive changes to the service that had been implemented in response to COVID. The cell would be reporting to the Executive Team on a weekly basis.

Other Items Considered by the Board

In respect of the financial position for the year-ended 31 March 2020 the Group Director of Finance and Contracting informed the Board that the unaudited position showed that the Trust had met its control total for the year and should therefore be eligible to receive funding through the Provider Sustainability Fund. It was expected that this should enable the Trust to achieve a break-even position.

The Board received updates from the Finance Committee, Audit Committee and People and Development Committee. The business of these committees had been primarily focussed around COVID-19 and the year-end reporting.

The Board also reviewed the Organisational Risk Register. It was noted that whilst the risk around COVID-19 had been rated high, steps had been taken to mitigate key aspects of the risk.

Next Board Meeting

A further briefing will be made available following the next meeting of the Board on Wednesday 27th May 2020.